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Oration on the Centennial
Anniversary of the birth of
Thomas Jefferson, Apr. 13, 1843.
By George M. Dallas.





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ORATION

ON THE

CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

BIRTH OF THOMAS JEFFERSON,

DELIVERED AT THE

COUNTY COURT HOUSE, PHILADELPHIA,

April 13th, 1843,

BY

GEORGE M. DALLAS.



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ORATION.

Nothing would seem now to be more universally conceded, than that the popular principles on which the laws and institutions of America have for upwards of fifty years been improved and administered, owe their dissemination, success and stability, more at least than to any other man, to Thomas Jefferson, of Virginia. That he laid their foundations broadly and strongly: that he maintained them, in their early progress, with steady and uncompromising zeal: that he brought to their support the invincible firmness of sincere and absolute conviction, the forces of a masterly mind, and the accomplishments of an active and varied experience: and that he practically illustrated their fitness to produce a greater amount of human happiness, more prosperity, more peace, more power, more wealth and more honor than were ever before attained within a given period of time, by human society, are facts which the solemn records of History no longer permit to be contested. His disciples and followers then, amid the signal triumphs of his doctrines which characterize the hundredth anniversary of his birth, may appropriately and gratefully celebrate him as the apostle of their faith, and the founder of Democracy on their continent. I propose, fellow-citizens, in discharge of the duties to which I have been invited, to invigorate your just devotion to the principles and inculcations of this great man, by rapidly refreshing your recollections of the prominent traits of his public service and of his political system.

He was born at Shadwell in the county of Albemarle, and at fourteen years of age, was left, by the death of his father, in possession of a large and valuable estate. Having passed through a course of Collegiate studies at William and Mary, and of professional studies under an able and illustrious teacher, George Wythe, he became a member of the bar in 1767. While yet engaged in preparing himself for his admission, he listened with wrapt attention to the impassioned and matchless eloquence of Patrick Henry, "who spoke as Homer wrote" on the Resolutions in the House of Burgesses denouncing the British Stamp Act; and thenceforward his mind teemed with the vast, bold, generous, and patriotic conceptions and purposes destined speedily to be developed in the causes alike of human nature and of his country. At the age of twenty-six Jefferson entered, as an elected member, the Legislature of his native province, and here, first, and long before the justly celebrated statute which adorns the code of our Pennsylvania, he proposed, though unsuccessfully, the emancipation of slaves:—making, on the very threshold of his public life, a step, with which all his subsequent achievements beautifully and nobly harmonized. At this epoch the tones of the approaching Revolution were heard like the sounds of a rising storm, and the gallant spirits formed to breast its fury and direct its consummation were calmly combining their strength, moral, intellectual and physical. Jefferson, in the midst of honorable companions, pressed eagerly forward, vindicating with his pen, at the hazard of an impending Bill of Attainder, "*The*

Rights of British America," looking far beyond "*the half way house of John Dickinson*" into the permanent refuge of Independence, and sagaciously foreshadowing, by the scheme of Committees of Correspondence, that glorious old Continental Congress whose wisdom, virtue, courage, and perseverance, no representative body of men has ever surpassed. Soon, at the age of thirty-three, he inseparably connected his genius and his fame, as we all know and feel, with the 4th of July 1776, and never for an instant suspended his toils, at what he termed "*the labouring oar at home,*" in a succession of the highest posts of interest and responsibility, until the independence and peace of his new Republic, the United States, were firmly secured. After devoting five years to forming and consolidating our foreign relations with the nations of Europe, and receiving at the brilliant metropolis of France the affectionate and respectful homage of its Scientific Institute, he returned to aid, as the chief counsellor of Washington, the first movements of the political organization under the Federal Constitution of 1789;—a constitution whose gradual structure he had, at the distance of three thousand miles, watched with extreme solicitude: whose dangerous uncertainties as originally modelled he beheld with alarm: but whose ultimate reconciliation, by amendments, to his own deep conviction of what was essential to preserve the freedom of the Confederacy and of the People, rendered it the object of his admiration and attachment.

Jefferson occupied no station which he did not illumine by the splendor of his mental exertions—none from which came not, at one moment or another, in some shape or other, his impressive exhortations for the advancement of his favorite popular regeneration—none in which he did not leave a monument to attest his untiring fidelity to duty. As Secretary of State, his diplomatic papers bore almost the aspect of instructive lectures to those to whom they were addressed, while in his written disquisitions on national and constitutional law, prepared, as guides, for the measures of the cabinet to which he belonged, his ever vigilant spirit irresistibly combatted the high-toned theories and aristocratic tendencies of the ablest of all his opponents. When Vice President, he formed a compilation of rules, maxims and precedents which, in our innumerable spheres of deliberative discussion, has ever been, and will probably ever continue, the standard to regulate the forms of proceeding, often, on critical emergencies, so vital to the purity, fairness and freedom of legislation.

From this hurried sketch of what preceded Jefferson's rise to the Chief Magistracy, you can only derive a faint impression of the basis on which his fame reposes. Certainly one of the lofty intelligences whence our Revolution received its earliest impulse—certainly one who impressed upon its action, its machinery and its result, the broad and regenerating principles of his own mind—certainly one who had exercised a vast and controlling influence in preventing the new political organization from assuming a character of vague, undefined, unrestricted and absorbing consolidation—he was, as certainly, at the beginning of the present century, and indeed had been for several years before, the acknowledged head of American Democracy. It is not my wish to tell you how even his adversaries, during the memorable era termed the Reign of Terror, seemed instinctively conscious of his enviable eminence, and of his approaching triumph. Nor will I recall their daring expedients to defeat

an elevation which seemed at once to extinguish the [smouldering embers of British and monarchical feeling, and to give to all ardent republicans assurance that our liberties were at last secured. As he took the helm of State, a peaceful revolution dawned on domestic policy, scarcely less momentous than the warlike one which he had opened with the Declaration of Independence. The people, ay, the very people of these states, were now to see realized in the operations of their government, the sanguine, consoling, though long deferred hopes, inspired by a mighty reformer, whose promises and pledges had ever been held sacred.

You will doubtless have perceived that there are two lights in which Thomas Jefferson should be regarded in order to be correctly appreciated:—one which exhibits him in relation to humanity at large, and another which exhibits him in relation to his fellow-countrymen alone.

As a member of the great human family, he is eminently entitled to be recorded as a Practical Philanthropist and Universal Benefactor. No one more vigorously, more perseveringly, or more effectually asserted and enforced the natural, equal, and unalienable rights and powers of his fellow beings. His eye pierced through, as his heart disdained, the trappings of pride, the pretensions of birth, the exclusiveness of classes, or the arrogance of inveterate forms. To him, Providence, Religion, Philosophy, and Common Sense, spoke, in vindication of the mass of mankind, a language at once uniform and unequivocal, and he echoed that language faithfully. He demanded their exemption from all government but that of their own choosing, and from all influence but that of their own conscience:—he claimed freedom as the inseparable attribute of each:—freedom to act, freedom to speak, freedom to adore! Confronting the systems and abuses of ages, he became the champion of the present and the future against the entailed servitude and miseries of the past. The unchecked dignity of earth's noblest creatures, their emancipation from thralldom of every description, their enjoyment of the blessings of life, of reason, and of liberty; these were the aims and inculcations of his justice and benevolence. Hereditary sway, or office, or rank, or privilege, he ridiculed as preposterous and condemned as pernicious. In a word, he stood up for his race, in every land, against every modification of tyranny, and in scorn and defiance of every encroachment upon what he esteemed the invaluable and unalienable gifts of a beneficent Creator.

Such principles, though founded in unchangeable truth, like those of Christianity, to which indeed they bear a strong affinity, could expect no toleration at the hands of the stern oligarchs, whom centuries of delusion and of crime had, on almost every inhabitable spot of the globe, habituated to the indulgences of selfishness and power. Although the world was even then too far advanced to permit their refutation, it is never too late for the advocates of usurpation and wrong to falsify, pervert, ridicule, and clamor down the aims and arguments of even-handed justice. The tocsin of alarm was sounded from all the sympathizing citadels of Royalty, peerage, knighthood, bigotry and freehold, and was prolonged by the chiming little belfries and tapering peaks of Vanity and Subserviency. The doctrines of Jefferson were, throughout Europe, modernized France alone excepted, meanly and unremittingly depicted as subversive of social order, repugnant to the execution of law, fatal to the

✓ rights of property, and incompatible with morals or religion. The Press, which in our days may be likened to the lightning rod that instantly transmits the electricity of genius from the loftiest heights to the deepest recesses, was then comparatively a sluggish conductor, and, at best, baffled by obstructions or neutralized by corruption. If explainable upon philosophical views, it is nevertheless an apparent anomaly, that men reputed to be in a civilized state, should voluntarily shut out the light, reject the earthly salvation offered for their acceptance, and perversely cling to the darkness and the doom of vassalage. What is true is however irrepressible, and sooner or later, in this century or the next, rest assured that our fellow-beings must every where imitate the example whose attractiveness it lies with the Republicans of America to preserve and improve.

The political system of Jefferson in relation to his own countrymen is that by which we are more nearly and more constantly affected. It is within this sphere that his devotion to freedom, his forecasting wisdom, and his conservative statesmanship, were exemplified in the almost endless details of practical government. The party divisions, which rapidly sprung up during the concoction and after the adoption of our existing Constitution, may, I think, be traced to what, speaking in the general, strongly indicated a design on the part of eminent men to let drop or evade the thoroughly popular doctrines on which they had achieved, and on which only they could have achieved, Independence:—to get rid, as it were, of friends that had outlived their liking—and to glide back, in substance, if not in form, to the British model. Such a design—or the bare suspicion of its being harboured, would naturally rouse, at a crisis so interesting, the utmost vigilance and activity of Jefferson. He perceived, at once, that the work of revolution was in reality unconsummated:—that the guarantee against a retrograde movement was yet wanting:—and that unless his fellow-citizens, made aware of their danger, could be induced to face their domestic opponents with the same promptitude and energy as they had faced their foreign ones, the means of safety would depart with the final adjournment of the Continental Congress, and might never be regained. The interval was perilous. Peace had in a measure promoted a relapse into former habits:—the prejudices of early education:—old feelings, always the warmer after a renewal of an interrupted intercourse:—the leaven of still but stimulating toryism:—and the influence of the only literature then circulating:—all combined with a keen appetite for the long withheld gains of a commerce with the “*Mother Country*,” to jeopard the only fruits worth ripening or reaping by the sacrifices and toils of a Rebellion.

It would involve too serious a draft upon your time on this occasion, to develop the manner in which the disadvantages and embarrassments of their position were encountered by the Patriarch of our party, and his affiliated republicans in each of the States. It was amidst the ensuing collisions of patriotism and of intellect, prolonged through the memorable era of '98, that the Constitution was happily moulded as it now is, and that the creed of Democracy, as contradistinguished from Federalism, was matured. How distinctly this creed followed out the beneficent maxims and motives of the Declaration of Independence, how effectually it foreclosed all backward tendencies or impulses, and how truly worthy it is of undiminished regard and implicit conformity, may be

seen by merely and briefly recurring, without a comment, to some of its principal features; thus —

1. The essential legal equality of human beings;
2. The people, the only source of legitimate power;
3. The absolute and lasting severance of church from state;
4. The freedom, sovereignty, and independence of the respective states;
5. The Union, a confederacy or compact: neither a consolidation, nor a centralization;
6. The Constitution of the Union; a special written grant of powers limited and definite.

Again—

1. No hereditary office, nor order, nor title;
2. No taxation beyond the public wants;
3. No national debt if possible;
4. No costly splendor of administration;
5. No proscription of opinion nor of public discussion;
6. No unnecessary interference with individual conduct, property, or speech;
7. The civil paramount to the military power.

And again—

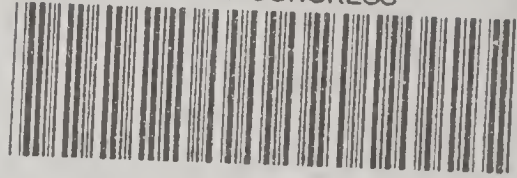
1. The representative to obey the instructions of his constituents;
2. No favored classes and no monopolies;
3. Elections free and suffrage universal;
4. No public moneys expended except by warrant of specific appropriation;
5. No mysteries in government inaccessible to the public eye;
6. Public compensation for public services, moderate salaries, and pervading economy and accountability.

The election of Jefferson to the Presidency, by the people of the United States, constituted their first authentic and emphatic ratification of the entire Democratic creed. He was unquestionably both its chief author and representative. His administration throughout illustrated and enforced its propositions with all their resulting and subsidiary deductions and doctrines; and what was the consequence? why, such was the extraordinary impulse given to prosperity and progress—such the enlargement of our means and population, our contentment, and our confidence, that, in the short period of twelve years, this infant republic was firm enough, and strong enough, and rich enough, and bold enough, single-handed and successfully, to cope with the mightiest of veteran nations. May I ask, fellow-citizens, whether it be presumptuous to say that the wonderful achievements and refulgent close of the war of 1812—obstructed, resisted, denounced, decried and thwarted as that war was by the antagonists of his system, should be gratefully accepted as an attested sanction of Providence on his labors and his purposes? and whether there was not something akin to revelation, which should awe the incredulous, in the tranquil manner in which at the age of 83, he accompanied, as it were, hand in hand, his early compeer, later competitor, and final proselyte, to rejoin another, even more glorious than either, at the bar of eternity, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and within the very hour on which he had affixed his immortal name to that immortal instrument?

Thus far, I am disposed, fellow-citizens, to consider the tribute of renown accumulated upon the meritorious life of Jefferson, as immeasurably and justly exceeding (Washington apart) that of any other man. His triumph as the ameliorating reformer of the principles and practices of government was, while he yet lived, signal and assured:—it has since widened and deepened; and it is still hourly advancing, expanding and strengthening. The shoot that he planted at “*The Raleigh Tavern*” in 1769, found a genial soil, and has luxuriated, amid occasional frosts but with constant sunshine, until now its roots have pierced into and grappled the granite mass, and its foliage blossoms and glitters in all directions. Every material change of law, and we know how unceasingly throughout the twenty-six states such changes occur,—and every modification of organic structure and theory, — not unfrequent either — are prompted and adapted, more or less, to effectuate his plans, and bear constantly renewing homage to the presence and power of his genius. No administration, general or local, political or municipal, deems itself safely started without a formal profession of the whole or the greater part of his rules of action, nor has any one disregarded his injunctions, without loss of character, entanglement and repentance. In fine, the senseless and delusive, though loud and fierce outcries which originally denounced him as the Jacobin, the Leveller, or the Destructive, have given place, even on the lips of most eloquent adversaries, to honeyed avowals of Jeffersonian Democracy!

They who enjoy benefits and blessings achieved by illustrious men, are under a sacred obligation to cherish their fame. This is the adequate and appropriate reward of virtuous toil; it is the only one which real magnanimity of soul ever contemplates, beyond the charm of success, as the fruit of patriotic exertion. The possession of office, the distributive power of patronage, the bustle and pageantry of public exaltation, or the opportunities of mercenary gain, are the aims of a tainted ambition:—no truly great and pure mind ever valued them. In this country, according to the stern spirit of our institutions, we can repay the labors of statesmen or the exploits of gallantry in but one way—by our remembrance and gratitude. In England, or in France, or in Russia, immense domains and boundless treasure are transferred as enduring testimonials of national regard; but with us, Jefferson, the pioneer, who bade the political wilderness blossom as a rose, impoverished by the ceaseless pursuit of our liberties and of a policy which added almost an empire to our territory, was thought fortunate in being able to relieve his personal wants by selling to Congress, and for half their worth, the very instruments or weapons he had so nobly employed. For a Wellington, a Soult, or a Paskevitch, millions are lavished; but for their American equal—equal in all that constitutes the victorious defender of one’s native land—the restoration of a paltry fine of a thousand dollars, extorted by an angry judge as the penalty for indiscriminating and absorbing patriotism, is unattainable. If we must not quarrel with this peculiarity of our republicanism—if we ought never to recognize money as a suitable representative of our veneration and love—let us at least give to these sentiments that fostering care and that signal manifestation which can only make them, what they were thought to be by their inspirers, an ample substitute for every thing else.

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